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“THE MULTISENSORY SPACE” - A NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

In this paper, I describe the experiences of a pedagogical development project at Laurea University of Applied Sciences in Finland. The project is realized by Laurea in co-operation with various learning institutes, municipalities and NGOs. The aim is to develop new methods for using multisensory learning environments for different target groups. In 2011-2014, the project is funded by The European Social Fund.

The basis of the project is “The Multisensory Space”, which means an easily modified space, where visitors can experience landscape, sounds and objects of a different cultural environment. In the Multisensory Space, a visitor can, for a moment, return to his or her past or explore a completely different world. Multisensory environment is used, for example, for collecting local memories and history, for promoting multiculturalism, and as an inspirational learning environment.

The development of “The Multisensory Space” as a method was started at Laurea with the multicultural work, where the aim is to promote intercultural interaction and the understanding of multicultural issues. Each year since 2008 more than 100 students at Laurea have been involved in the project. According to the students’ feedback, the project has provided new insights concerning intercultural communication and working with the concept of identity negotiation.

For five years, the idea has been applied together with different target groups. Different pilots have shown that the model can be applied to open multisensory learning environments in different contexts, and it can be utilized in the activities of different organizations, such as learning institutions, libraries and museums. It is not only the visitors who benefit from the model and vice versa. Rather, it is more about the empowerment process where people from different backgrounds build and negotiate the environments together.

At the end of my presentation, I shall discuss how you could apply the method in the teaching at the comprehensive school. It does not merely mean the ready-made learning environment but the students could build the different “multisensory environments” in groups as their learning projects. Building the space together concretizes abstract things, and the method could be used for different subjects, such as teaching languages or history, for the benefit of different learners.

Keywords: Learning environments, multisensory space, development project, community learning, innovative teaching methods

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning French while sitting in a Parisian café? Creating an immigrant's home country in a classroom?

The need for developing new models of learning environments rises from many different contemporary social phenomena. Learning must be examined more and more as a lifelong, both formal and non-formal phenomenon. There is a need for open learning environments and networking with different actors of society. Learning institutions create new pedagogical models where the learners are more active part of the learning process and the learning process is connected with the surrounding community. Active learning as a concept is not new. Education theorists like John Dewey or David Kolb have described learning 'as a process of taking in experiences, attaching new knowledge to what one already knows, and making and remaking one's understanding of the world' [1]. Also Wenger's [2] concept of "community of practice" provides a useful perspective on knowing and learning.

Hall [3] defines in resent world identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. From this point of view, cultural identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. There are not only immigrants and second generation members who need to think and redefine their identity – in the changing world, everyone has to think about their own identity again. Everyone has the possibility to choose a subculture or local community to which they feel they are belonging.

Nowadays multisensority is emerging in very different contexts like in environment planning, learning, and marketing. In social and health care, multisensory spaces have been used in supporting the rehabilitation and well-being of the more severely disabled. According to Sirkkola [4], sociocultural multisensory work is a work orientation in which human is seen as an active, creating, affecting and experience-needing person. The main point in sociocultural thinking is the principle that we need to give to different individuals, also the most severely disabled, a chance to participate in planning and developing their life and environment. Multisensory spaces give an inspirational starting point for this. Co-operation between different sensory systems has an important role in adapting information. Therefore, multisensority is ideal also in supporting learning.

Multisensority has also been used in elderly care. In reminiscence work, multisensory stimulation helps to remember. Reminiscence -talking about memories together- promotes the sense of community, helps individuals to connect their individual experiences to the history of society. Reminiscence is not only for the elderly; people in all ages can reminisce – it promotes the sense of community and it is also the way to get a common understanding between people with different backgrounds or different generations.

In the project, the examined and developed concept of "Multisensory Space" is used in a slightly different meaning than it has been used, for example, in rehabilitation work. It is based on a Laurea University of Applied Sciences project (2009-2010), which piloted multisensory space opportunities specifically in increasing the intercultural understanding. The environments were based on the memories and cultures of different immigrant groups. The process to build multisensory environments is a way to talk about identity and also the ready-made space is used for reminiscence and encounters between people from different backgrounds.

When developing the space, we found out that it can be applied to many different purposes. Therefore we started a new project, where the idea has been developed, modelled and applied to different applications for different target groups.

2. The idea of the Multisensory Space

The idea of the Multisensory Space is that it is an easily modified space which can be used for different purposes and can even be built to different environments. The Space can be set in two different ways: as a permanent solution (for example into a class room), or as a temporarily solution (for some event).

The idea is to build a multisensory space, which means that in the space there should be:

- something visual (pictures, video footage, small items)
- something audible (music, sounds)
- something to touch (different kinds of material, small items)
- something to taste (food, drinks)
- scents (spices, food, herbs, drinks)

The space does not have to be a copy of the reality. The idea is to build a suggestive space that can be accomplished with electronic pictures, sound effects and simple décor. Because of its multisensory nature, there should also be some scents, for example spices or fragrances and something to taste and touch.

The Multisensory Space at Laurea University of Applied Sciences is built in one class room. At Laurea there are also two tents, two mobile versions of the Space with a structure of a fair stand with canvas, which can be used indoors.

As important as the Multisensory Space as a ready-made environment is, the process where different actors build the spaces together is even more important. At Laurea, the students and immigrants build the environments together. In third sector, it can be a group of volunteers. At youth houses or community houses, there can also be a group who build the environment together. The process is based on the needs and ideas of the group members. The group itself defines the goals and the realization of the process.

The actual realization of the Space can vary according to the needs of the group building the Space. The process of building the Space empowers the individuals connected to the process and serves as a means for learning. In different communities, it can promote the sense of togetherness. Building of the Space concretizes abstract things, thus making it easier for individuals to process e.g. the meaning of different habits and cultural practices. It serves as a way to discuss identities and values and to share memories. In the ready-made Spaces, it is possible to present and showcase for example different cultures and different ways of living. The environment can be built to be something that reinforces personal experiences and memories or as something that visualizes the shared aspects of life to others.



Fig 1 Multisensory Space as a place for intercultural encounters

3. WITH ALL SENSES PROJECT

3.1 With all senses – Project Description

The development process of the Multisensory Method started at Laurea University of Applied Sciences in 2007-2008 as student projects. In 2009-2010, the method was further developed in a project called “Encounters in Multisensory Space,” which was granted partial funding from The European Fund for the Integration of Third-country Nationals.

In September 2011, the project With All Senses – Developing Open Learning Environments was launched to continue the development and promotion of the method. Laurea University of Applied Sciences coordinates the project with six national partners: The Provincial Museum of Lapland, Heinolan kansalaisopisto (Heinola Adult Education), Hämeen Kylät ry, The City of Vantaa, Päivälehti museum and Metropolia University of Applied Sciences. The project is funded by the European Social Fund. The project ends in December 2014.

With All Senses promotes the creation of multisensory learning environments for different target groups. A cultural heritage is reflected in the memories of one person/group in a purpose-built experiential environment. The multisensory environment of the project is used, for example, for collecting local memories and history, for promoting multiculturalism and as an inspirational learning environment. The final result will be a model which can be applied in open multisensory learning environments in different contexts and utilized in the activities of different organizations, such as

learning institutions, libraries and museums. Project partners with different backgrounds have also different motivation to take part in the project: the museums are activating the visitors, the learning institutions wish to promote inspiring learning, and the third sector actors want to have new action models to promote the sense of community and belonging or participatory methods for future planning of the community. All network partners are also interested in to develop the cooperation and create common activities and local networks.

With all senses - Developing open learning environments project focuses on creating a multisensory space as an open learning environment and as an encountering and relaxation space for different kinds of people. The project aims to develop a concept of how planning and building multisensory spaces in small groups can be an empowering experience and work well as a communal learning process. In a memorable and interactive environment the story of one person is united as part of a common cultural heritage. In the multisensory space the visitor can, for a moment, return to his past or explore a whole different world.

In the project, the seven partners have made twenty-eight pilots with different target groups and action models. In addition, many of those pilot environments have been set up several times, like the "cottage of future", where the people of the village can discuss and create alternative models of future for their own community.

3.2 Laurea's Pilot

In addition to coordinating the project, Laurea University of Applied Sciences has its own pilots. The purpose of the pilots is to promote the intercultural competence of students and to develop an inspiring learning environment for the higher education.

Laurea's students are involved in the project in many ways, for example by completing courses, practical studies or an internship or by making their thesis in the project. The pilots proceed according to Laurea's Learning by developing pedagogy. This means a pedagogy which takes place in workplace-oriented projects in which students, lecturers, workplace experts and customers work together to develop innovative solutions. Working together to build knowledge-based skills leads to competence that allows students to manage diverse situations in the constantly changing world of work. In the "With all senses" project students work in co-operation with the third sector and municipal actors, like public libraries, kindergartens and primary schools. In 2013, there were 118 Laurea students who have been involved in the project.

As an example of partners can be mentioned the local Adult Education Center of Vantaa (Vantaan Aikuisopisto), which organizes language courses for immigrants. Together with the immigrants, the social service students of Laurea build a multisensory room, based on background and memories of immigrants. Building the multisensory space and defining its goals is always done as a team. The theme is chosen together. It can be for example the general feeling of immigrants' culture or country, city or favourite place. It can also be a festival, traditional day or personal memory. The goal to have this kind of common project is fruitful for both partners. The social service students get to practice intercultural communication and learn about immigrants' background. For the immigrants, it is a way to practice Finnish. For many immigrants this is also a first contact with Finnish people and the Finnish education system.

The other option for intercultural learning for the Laurea students is to work with exchange students. When international exchange students work together with Laurea students, they both have a great opportunity to learn from each other and change ideas about their studies.

The multisensory class room is also used as a relaxing, learning environment e.g. for language teaching. For example in a "French café" there is a cosy atmosphere to practice spoken *language skills*.

According to the feedback by the students, they have learned to work in multicultural teams. Both Finnish students and the immigrants have been pleased to work together. Through this practical work they can talk about culture and background of immigrants and make them visible in the Multisensory

Space. This process gives them possibility to learn to understand each other better. In addition, the Finnish students as well as the exchange students learn intercultural communication, group work and project work.

4. RESULTS

In With all senses project we have developed new action models on how the Multisensory Space could be used. Opportunities of the Multisensory Space are developed, in a user-based fashion, at high schools, libraries, third sector organisations and museums together with space users, workers and administrators.

The project has developed, side by side, both the physical space as a technical innovation and space-related action models. The project has examined the different environments and the actors' needs and ways to use the Multisensory Space.

The method can activate the communities and it is also useful to make different public and semi-public spaces more relaxing and familiar for the users. It gives the possibility to modify the space according to the needs of the users. And even the users have the chance to modify the space by themselves.

Public partners like museums and libraries have found new ways to serve the clients. This is useful when their role is changing from information service providers towards experience service providers.

At Laurea, the Space has proven its functionality as a tool of multicultural learning and in supporting the cultural identity of immigrants. The participants of the project – students and minorities – have appreciated the equal encounters between representatives of minorities and majorities. This process is essential in developing intercultural understanding.

The technical realization of the space has been lively discussed. We have decided to keep the technology simple so that you can use for the Multisensory Space the same technology as schools already have. Concerning the technical solutions there has to be a balance. The space has to be unique and impressive and yet, it should be easily modified. The reflected picture the size of the whole wall is an important creator of the atmosphere. In addition to electric pictures, there must be something for tasting, feeling and smelling. To modify a class room is also a question of time – it cannot be too time consuming.

5. NEW APPLICATIONS

During the project we have got a lot of ideas of how to apply the Multisensory Space model within different sectors of society. I would like to highlight some points of view to further develop this multisensory method as a model of pedagogy.

The possibilities to use the Multisensory Space in primary and secondary schools should be studied and piloted more.

One result of our pilots is that for the users it is empowering to have the possibility to modify the public space. It promotes the feeling of belonging and that the public place such as a school, library or city hall belongs to the actors or community – this is especially important for the minorities but also in general for all users or clients of public spaces. At schools, the attention could be paid to this point of view: Does the method increase the school satisfaction and feeling that the school is an own place for the pupils?

Also, the Multisensory Space method could be very useful in, for example, history or geography teaching. The pupils could build the historical or geographical environments as a team work. The

multisensory historical environment would be more inspiring and interesting for the students. For the whole class, the different kinds of learning environments activate the students and also give them possibilities to use varied types of space building sources.

In our project, working in different kinds of local networks has been very fruitful. For example, Laurea students have built environments for relaxation and minority culture in public libraries. This model could be further applied when trying to find out what kind of environments the pupils of primary school could produce for the public libraries or for the museums. Or for shopping centres, kindergartens or City Halls? At its best, the Multisensory Method and the movable space that is the mobile version of the space could be a tool to connect different actors, different institutions, different generations and different individuals.



Fig 2 Multisensory Space for history learning

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